

3e tableau : L'essai comme genre

"Forgive the digression": Williams's Essay into the Non-Fiction Genre

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"Forgive the digression: it is characteristic of my awkward adventures in the field of nonfictional prose."

—Tennessee Williams, "Let Me Hang It All Out"¹

Williams's *Memoirs* (and to some extent his novella *Moise and the World of Reason*, published the same year²) reveals more about his life than about his art or his theory of artistic production. In it, we are rarely offered insight into the creation of a character or the genesis of a play, rarely provided a philosophy of his dramaturgy. Instead, we encounter story after story of the playwright's past struggle to become a writer and his present struggle to continue being one. "Truth is the bird we hope to catch in 'this thing,'" he writes midway through the autobiography, and "truth" for him was something "better approached through [his] life story than an account of [his] career" (M 219). To a great extent, the same could be said about Williams's essays.

Anyone interested in Williams's non-fiction would do well to begin with the *Memoirs*, for it provides a roadmap by which to navigate one's way through the essays. One of the obvious reasons for this is that several of his essays found their way into the *Memoirs*, such as his tributes to Laurette Taylor (M 107-9), Carson McCullers (M 135-38), and William Inge (M 110-14, 208, 272-74). Even portions of his 1960 essay, "Prelude to a Comedy," on his experiences at the American Hospital in Neuilly, France, and his 1973 essay "Homage to Key West" are there.³ Recycling essays was certainly a way for Williams to fill the pages of a book he declared at times that he did not want to write.⁴ Another reason, though,

is that the *Memoirs* reproduces on a larger canvas what the essays frequently accomplish on a smaller scale.

"Why do I resist writing about my plays?" Williams asks himself provocatively in the *Memoirs*. "The truth is," he responds,

[...] I feel that the plays speak for themselves. And that my life hasn't and that it has been remarkable enough, in its continual contest with madness, to be worth setting upon paper. And my habits of work are so much more private than my daily and nightly existence. (M 193)⁵

Williams's "truth" was not always pretty in the *Memoirs*, or flattering, either to himself or to those about whom he candidly wrote. While many of the facts used to construct the memories recounted in the book are not always accurate, the *Memoirs* was, as far as Williams was concerned, truthful, and that counted for everything in his world. Simply put, non-fiction was Williams's public confessional, a place where parable-like recollections of his past could resonate certain truths about his vision of humanity and the directions he thought it was taking.

Like the *Memoirs*, many of the essays gathered in this collection claim "truth" through exaggerated or, at times, questionable facts, and they also frequently end up neglecting to address the plays many were meant to introduce prior to their Broadway opening. And yet, these essays do talk about the plays or, at least, they talk around the plays, substituting narrative digression for interpretative analysis. In many ways, the essays collected here form individual chapters of Williams's shadow memoirs that when read in parallel with the *Memoirs* demonstrate how his non-fiction prose constituted for him singular pieces of a complex mosaic: by themselves, the essays capture those significant moments in Williams's personal and professional life, to which he referred time and time again; reconstituted as a whole, they display the splendor of Williams's lifelong pursuit of the truth, personal and artistic alike.

What these non-fiction pieces also reveal is Williams's paradoxical nature as an essayist. He never wanted to have to explain his work to his audiences and critics, but, when they did not "get" it (or if Williams suspected that they might not), he also never turned down the frequent requests by newspaper and magazine editors to contribute a pre-opening piece ostensibly aimed at providing interpretational direction to, or serving as a "trailer"⁶ for, a new play prior to its Broadway premier. In *Questions*

Without Answers (1948), Williams articulates his skepticism to write directly about his plays:

Writing an article about your play prior to its New York opening is not going to improve the quality of the play and, moreover, it may have the disadvantage of suggesting to the suspicious that an effort is being made to load the dice. [. . .] To explain is okay if there is something that needs explaining. (NSE 40)

And yet, in an unpublished fragment draft of *Person-To-Person*, entitled "A Thing Called Personal Lyricism" (ca. 1955), Williams shows that he recognized the essay's potential to "soften-up the New York critics at just the proper moment," though a history of having received mixed press notices had taught him that "an author's disarmingly modest 'pitch' in front of the tent will have little if any effect upon the show's reception in the press" (Texas [5, 6]). Consequently, Williams was simultaneously eager and hesitant to write these invited pieces of what he called his "Apologia": eager because he understood the author's role in promoting himself within the economy of Broadway, and hesitant because he knew that perceived personal self-promotions could readily backfire.

Evidence of this paradoxical, self-effacing Williams, what Dean Shackelford describes as the "camp sensibility"⁸ of his essays, abounds in both his published and his unpublished non-fiction works. In *T. Williams's View of T. Bankhead* (1963), for example, Williams redirects his reader's attention away from the play under discussion in order to preempt charges of authorial pretension:

I have been invited to contribute to these pages an explication of the meaning and history of my latest version of my "last long play for Broadway," but I am sure you will forgive me for hoping that the play will speak for itself, and to choose the relevant subject of Miss Tallulah Bankhead. (NSE 134)

Redirection of the kind expressed here was Williams's signature line of defense in his essays. "There is nothing more 'loaded' than the self-defense of a writer," Williams expresses in another draft fragment entitled "Past, Present & Perhaps" (ca. 1957), for "[a]ll the honest things that a writer has to say about his work are said in the work itself" (Texas [1]). And in another fragment to the essay of *Person-To-Person*, entitled

"Personal Lyricism (?)"⁹ (ca. 1955), we detect both the eager self-promoter and the reticent essayist:

Whenever I receive an invitation from a newspaper drama department to do one of these essays as a sort of trumpet-note to herald the approach of a new Williams play of mine, I accept the gentle proposal each time more nervously. For a trumpet is a pretentious instrument, all brass instruments are, and if the heralding note should sound pretentiously portentous, ~~or portentously pretentious~~, or pompous or coy or ~~all or any~~ any or all of those disagreeable unattractive things that a playwright can be when he intrudes upon the margins of some other literary fields, the anticipation of the coming play may be adversely effected. Yet I do accept the invitation, hazardous though it be is, for there is always something I want to get off my chest about the theatre or my activities in it, and these play productions are usually spaced at intervals that give time to show changes in attitude as clearly as a series of photographs over a number of years will show time's print on a face. (Texas [1])¹⁰

A couple of years later, he had this to say in a fragment entitled "Past, Present & Perhaps"¹¹ (ca. 1957):

There is nothing more "loaded" than the self-defense of a writer, and this ~~is a fact is so well known~~ evident that it does no good to attempt one. All the honest things that a writer has to say about his work are said in the work itself. It's not only undignified to give your "pitch" for your play on the Sunday before it opens but it is practically useless. (Texas [1])

In redirecting readers away from the subject at hand, Williams also risked alienating his editors and his readers. Because of this, Williams frequently did not know which of these two essayists he should be and, moreover, when. As a result, he often adopted a third position, one we encounter repeatedly throughout the essays: that of the raconteur of personal anecdotes.

Numerous critics faulted the *Memoirs* at the time of publication for its lack of discernible structure. They complained that it stumbles illogically from one anecdote to another, some set in the present as with his travails concerning the production of *Small Craft Warnings*, some set in the distant or recent past. Much of the same criticism could be leveled against his essays, however, since they, too, seemingly ramble through remembrances and recollections. Williams predicted this criticism, because it was not the first time he had heard it, and defends his apparent "disregard for chronological order" (M 308) in a statement in the

foreword to the *Memoirs*, which could also serve as the doctrine for nearly all his non-fiction prose:

This whole book is written by something like the process of "free association," which I learned to practice during my several periods of psychoanalysis. It concerns the reportage of present occurrences, both trivial and important; and of memories, mostly much more important. At least to me.

I will frequently interrupt recollections of the past with an account of what concerns me in the present because of many of the things which concerned me in the past continue to preoccupy me today.

Whether or not it will be acceptable to you will depend in part on your tolerance for an aging man's almost continual scuttling back and forth between his recollections and his present state. (M x-xi)¹²

Scattered throughout the *Memoirs* are Williams's personal anecdotes, stories about his sister Rose's lobotomy or his antics during a preproduction reading of *Sweet Bird of Youth*: "This anecdote is merely inserted here to show once again the state of nerves, the panic, the long, long slide toward a crack-up that stretched appallingly before me, even that long ago" (M 220-21). The digressions are not meant to lead us away from the truth but precisely heighten our awareness of it. What appears as uncontrolled digression, though, is in fact a palimpsest of authorial intrusion where one anecdote directly informs another, and the layers of meaning they both contain separately intertwine to construct a large sense of Williams's artistic "truth." If the essays, like the *Memoirs*, seem preoccupied more with telling than with showing, it is because Williams treats them as he does his short fiction and drama and places the burden of interpretation on the reader/audience.

Williams had perfected this style of deferral, innuendo, connotation, and parable earlier in the essays themselves. This phenomenon led Dean Shackelford to conclude that "[...] Williams's prose is often loosely structured, organic, and informal, and he combines these three categories oftentimes in one essay or review." (Shackelford 104) Many of the pieces reprinted in this collection wax philosophical about issues of violence (*The World I Live In*) or decadence in modern drama ("Tennessee Williams Presents His POV"). Or they supply endless strings of personal anecdotes about Williams's family (*The Man In the Overstuffed Chair*), success (*The Catastrophe of Success*), injuries (*The Wolf and I*), work ethics (*I Have Rewritten a*

Play For Artistic Purity), politics (*We Are Dissenters Now*), or thorny relationships with the glitterati and literati of the theatre world (*Tennessee, Never Talk to an Actress*). In short, they seem to talk about anything and everything except the plays themselves. In *Prelude to a Comedy*, for example, Williams offers a “Philosophical Shop Talk On the Art of Playwriting” in lieu of commentary on *Period of Adjustment*, and the anecdotes recounted in it were so far-reaching that the papers’ editors felt the need to add the following apologetic deck, “Without mentioning his new play [. . .].”¹³

Many of the essays in this book similarly leap from one point to another, from one era to another, only to return again to the original idea at hand:

“But I am supposed to be writing about my relations with actresses. I’m sorry I got off the track” — “‘Tennessee, Never Talk to an Actress’” (NSE 157)

“With little effort at cohesion, let’s turn sharply south” — “A Writer’s Quest for a Parnassus” (NSE 264)

“I hope I will not annoy you again in this ‘Sunday piece’ by another statement as pretentious-sounding as that one, so let us go quickly back to the safer ground of simple recollections” — “The Past, the Present and the Perhaps” (NSE 277)

“To return to the woman in the alcove” — “Questions Without Answers” (NSE 42)

“Now let’s get on the ‘Streetcar’” — “T. Williams’s View of T. Bankhead” (NSE 136)

“Enough of these philosophical abstractions, for now. To get back to writing for the theatre [. . .]” — “Foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth*” (NSE 95)

“I suppose the title of the piece I’m writing you now, I mean this effort at a prose article, has prepared you for some digressions [. . .]” — “These Scattered Idioms [II]” (ca. 1960, Columbia)

“Now let me attempt to entertain you once more with an anecdote” — “Too Personal?” (NSE 166)

“Now I could try to weave this bit of art-philosophy into the much more practically professional discussion that follows, but I would waste your time and mine in such an effort, that would probably fail. So let me just divide them with a few asterisks and plunge right into a very loosely connected discussion” — fragment, “some intensely personal” — fragment for “*Prelude to a Comedy*”] (ca. 1960, Columbia)

"Having bored you quite enough with talk about my plays, let me try to amuse you with an anecdote about Mother at the retirement home" —
"Let Me Hang It All Out" (NSE 173)

These digressions appear too frequently to be insignificant. Whether as anecdotes about dog bites that rightly foreshadowed those lacerations he would soon receive from the critics in their press notices, as recollections of overstuffed chairs that he would soon sit in himself, or as digressions about retirement homes to which he was not ready to retire from the stage, Williams used the allusion to negotiate his way through the paradox of having to explain his work to the public (which he said he would never do), all the while appearing to have said nothing at all.

Williams was a master of digressions in his essays, not with the intention to obfuscate but precisely to clarify. Williams was fully aware of this fact, however, writing in the draft fragment "The Play of Character" (ca. June/July 1960): "As usual in my prose compositions for journals, I must offer you a number of generalities which are loosely and ramblingly connected, but containing a few things that I wanted to say" (Texas [1]). Each digression contributed to his overall design of the work, something he would explain in his 1948 essay "Something Wild . . .": "I have a way of jumping from the particular to the abstract, for the particular is sometimes as much as we know of the abstract" (NSE 46). Like the abstract painters he admired—evinced in both his essay "An Appreciation of Hans Hofmann" and novella *Moise and the World of Reason*—Williams never created linear work, be it a single play, or an essay, or the total sum of his oeuvre. Personal anecdotes and parables were simply the oils with which he frequently painted,¹⁴ and Williams spent a lifetime exploring ways in which to combine them on the canvas.

It is fairly certain that Williams rarely wrote non-fiction in the morning, for that was a creative time devoted to the plays, and prose writing was considered more or less an exercise or a distraction, as he admits in *The Art of Acting and Anna* (ca. 1955): "[. . .] since I've just quit work for the day and my energy is low, let's begin with untrue acting first" (Texas, [1]).¹⁵ When he encountered writer's block, he would not let it cheat him of a day's work. In his "Preface" to *Slapstick Tragedy*, Williams explains that "since I can't just stop working, I divert myself with some shorter project, a story, a poem, or a less ponderous play" (NSE 147). To

that list, we could add the essay. "These diversions," he continues, "are undertaken simply as that, as diversions, and they nearly always have a quality in common, which is experimentation in content and in style, particularly in style. The fatigue I felt before this escapade is lifted. I find myself enjoying my work again" (NSE 147). Creative writing for Williams was simply more demanding than expository writing. This does not mean Williams disparaged his non-fiction writing, though he did refer to himself in *Moise and the World of Reason* as "a distinguished failed prose writer" (Moise 133).¹⁶ On the contrary, he wrote in the *Memoirs* that he felt he had "written a goodly quantity of prose works, some of which [he] prefer to [his] plays" (M 225). With exemplary essays such as "Grand" and "The Man In the Overstuffed Chair," there is little room to disagree with him.

"With little effort at cohesion, let's turn sharply south" to the essays themselves.

Williams's juvenilia, youthful writings, and college papers together show him as a non-fiction writer from a very young age. His prize-winning essay for Smart Set, *Can a Wife Be a Good Sport?*, demonstrates Williams's talent for voice and for creating a persona entirely different from his own: though only sixteen years old at the time of the essay's composition, Williams convincingly presents himself as a cuckolded husband of perhaps twice that age. The ten short high school newspaper pieces that recount Williams's 1928 European tour with his grandfather also exemplify his skill at noting detail, which he had hoped would serve him the following year when he left St. Louis to attend the celebrated journalism school at the University of Missouri in Columbia. From the "burial vault of the venerable old Capuchin monks" (NSE 225) to the "blackened ruins" of Battle of Belleau Wood, these ten travelogues contain the seeds of Williams's penchant for the gothic.

His three years at Mizzou may have helped Williams's writing career in ways he could not have foreseen at the time. Though he left in 1932 without taking a degree, Williams's writing experiences there taught him that his passion and his abilities lay in creative and not in expository writing, academic or otherwise. The college papers, such as the seminar papers "Some Representative Plays of O'Neill And a Discussion of his Art" and "Birth of an Art (Anton Chekhov and the New Theatre)," exhibit not only the breadth and depth of Williams's literary and dramatic

education, but also his understated exasperation with having had to spend precious energy concentrating on the works of other writers when, as his Notebooks inform us, he was in full stride writing and submitting poems, stories, and plays to various magazines and contests. Significant is Otto Heller's assessment of the second of these two term papers, which Williams wrote for his "General Literature III" course, "Principal and Problems of Literature," during the spring of 1937: "This paper is no way fulfills the requirements of a term paper as indicated repeatedly. [. . .] All of this, or nearly all, was written without reference or relation to literary standards and criteria as studied in the course. O.H." (NSE 292).

By the early 1940s, before his "catastrophe of success" with *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams learned that non-fiction prose could serve to advance his career as a creative writer. Essays such as "Amor Perdido," "Te Morituri Salutamus," and "Preface to My Poems" were all carefully crafted pieces intended "to sell" his creative work to his audiences, his critics, and his readers. "Amor Perdido" ["Lost Love"], for example, looks nostalgically, if not disingenuously, at Williams's salad days preceding the production of *Battle of Angels*: "The old life seemed to be over. The new one had not begun yet. This was a time in between" (NSE 7). Following the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams was often asked by friends, newspapers, or publishers to produce non-fiction pieces to promote the writing of others. If "The Author Tells Why It is Called *The Glass Menagerie*" helped to draw audiences for the Dowling production of the play, "The History of a Play (With Parentheses)" gave James Laughlin's *Pharos* a boost in publishing a play that many Boston audiences and critics found in 1940 to have been written by the Devil himself. His essay "A Playwright's Statement" similarly bolstered Margo Jones's work in her *Theatre '45* in Dallas. This decade, and the one which followed it, saw Williams devoting a significant amount of energy to writing long and complex introductions or reviews for his friends: Carson McCullers, Paul Bowles, Marian Gallaway, Donald Windham, Oliver Evans, Gilbert Maxwell, and later, Jane Bowles, Virginia Spenser Carr, and Richard Leavitt. During the 1950s, when Williams was struggling for another Broadway sensation, these introductions became shorter, darker, and less effulgent. By the 1960s, he was essentially contributing book blurbs.

The diminishing length and complexity of these essays evince in part how Williams felt himself being lured away from composing his own

art in support of another's. Notable is his curt reply to Audrey Wood when he was asked to write the introduction to William Inge's play, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*: "it is one thing to type three words—'For Tennessee Williams'—on a dedication page [but] quite another thing to write several pages of introduction."¹⁷ This attitude is best revealed in his brief and unsettling handwritten foreword to Dakin Williams's legal memoirs, *The Bar Bizarre*. In a piece that damns as it praises, Williams demonstrates what little effort he was willing to devote to the promotion even of his brother:

I am sure that the inimitable and indomitable humor of my brother Dakin will more than make this book delightful reading, especially since he has the editorial assistance of our friend Lucy Freeman who reproduced so faithfully the southern eloquence of our late mother's Remember Me To Tom. (NSE 219)

These "appreciations" are nonetheless significant in Williams's non-fiction since in each we find him talking as much about himself and his own developing troubles with audiences and critics as he does about the writer whose work he is appraising.

Most significant, though, are the journalistic pieces Williams wrote that appeared in many of America's important newspapers and magazines. What is perhaps most striking about them is how Williams kept returning over the years, in essay after essay, to the same people, the same places, and the same year: Tallulah Bankhead, Acapulco, 1940. It was as if Williams's essays formed a compass, and *Battle of Angels* was his North. Whenever he felt lost in the theater world, worried that another play of his would not be received favorably by the press or by the public, Williams would repeatedly steer his response in an essay toward the direction of the needle, which would guide him safely back to the security of a past just prior to fortune and fame. Strangely absent from these essays are the names of people like Kip Kiernan and the writing havens like Provincetown. Instead, we repeatedly encounter Andrew Gunn, a name that barely figures in any of Williams's writing, or Jim Parrot or Clark Mills. Perhaps it was because they influenced Williams's aesthetics at an impressionable time in his life, whereas Kip and Provincetown were matters of the heart. We do find New Orleans and Key West mentioned in the essays, but more in their relation to his break-out year with *Battle of*

Angels than with the later theatric successes they are more commonly aligned. In the late essay, "Homage to Key West" (1973), for instance, Williams spends more time talking about his time on the island in 1941 than he does about his present-day life on his Key West compound. Like Bankhead, Laurette Taylor frequently makes an appearance in the essays, perhaps because she is associated with the end to Williams's obscurity, and her performance in *The Glass Menagerie* is inseparable from his being thrust into a life of celebrity and wealth (and all the trappings that go with it) from which he never really recovered.

While his 1940s essays contain the most ebullient of Williams's non-fiction, his classic essays, "The Catastrophe of Success," "Questions Without Answers," and "Something Wild . . ." in 1947 and 1948 mark the beginning of the end of his Broadway honeymoon. By the 1950s, his essays grow gradually more defensive in tone. No Williams production on Broadway after *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948) would ever be met again with such deference to the playwright, and consequently no later essay would speak with that confident insouciance he displays in "Amor Perdido" or "The History of a Play (With Parentheses)." Each essay of the 1950s would to some extent portray a playwright on the attack against philistine critics or prejudiced audiences ("The Timeless World of a Play," "Foreword to The Rose Tattoo," "Foreword to Camino Real"), or on the defensive against a growing rumble of dissatisfaction with the one-time darling of the *Great White Way* ("Afterword to Camino Real," "Critic Says 'Evasion,' Writer Says 'Mystery,'" "The Past, the Present, and the Perhaps," "Tennessee Williams Presents His POV," "Prelude to a Comedy"). Perhaps the decade is best captured by his essay "The World I Live In," which projects simultaneously these attacks and these defenses of a writer who found success again in 1955 with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In it, he dons both caps—that of theatre critic and playwright—and responds curtly to those questions he was all too tired hearing in interviews or reading in the press:

Tennessee Williams Interviews Himself

Question. Can we talk frankly?

Answer. There's no other way we can talk.

Q. Perhaps you know that when your first successful play, *The Glass Menagerie*, was revived early this season, a majority of the reviewers felt

that it was still the best play you have written, although it is now twelve years old?

A. Yes, I read all my play notices and criticisms, even those that say that I write for money and that my primary appeal is to brutal and ugly instincts.

Q. Where there is so much smoke—!

A. A fire smokes the most when you start pouring water on it.

Q. But surely you'll admit that there's been a disturbing note of harshness and coldness and violence and anger in your more recent works?

A. I think, without planning to do so, I have followed the developing tension and anger and violence of the world and time that I live in through my own steadily increasing tension as a writer and person. (NSE 83)

The essays from this decade, most of which appeared in the New York Times, represent the golden age of Williams's non-fiction writing and, perhaps, his most significant contributions to the essay as literary genre.

By the 1960s and 1970s, Williams's essays become so complex that they defy classification. The success of *The Night of the Iguana*, for instance, can be felt in the returned confidence of his essay "A Summer of Discovery." And the autobiographical masterpieces, "The Man In the Overstuffed Chair" and "Grand," capture a Williams still very much at the heights of his non-fiction skills. Most of the later essays, however, bring Williams's defensive stance to their apex (or nadir). Time and time again, we find in them a Williams writing to convince his public and his critics that he was still America's greatest living playwright. The later essays, from his preface to *Slapstick Tragedy* to the program note for the Vancouver production of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, are both rhetorical attempts to defend his social politics in his plays and pleas for audiences to be indulgent with their experimental natures. In the Vancouver program note, for example, Williams writes:

I confess to you without shame and without apology that this is melodrama, not classically pure tragedy.

The written play reminds me somewhat of a raw, bloody wound. But as I leave it in the hands of these Vancouver Playhouse actors and their gifted director, I am confident that they will lift the written text above its stature and perhaps they may even offer you a reasonable likeness to the form of that all-but-impossible thing, another work of mine that could stand with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. (NSE 218)

Essays such as "Happiness Is Relevant," "Tennessee, Never Talk to an Actress," "Too Personal?" "Let Me Hang It All Out," "Where My Head Is Now and Other Questions," "I Have Rewritten a Play For Artistic Purity," and "I Am Widely Regarded as the Ghost Of a Writer" provide evidence of an artist on the brink, a writer whose frustration with myopic audiences and belligerent theater critics is echoed in his interviews, his letters, and his bitter, unfinished essay, *Mes Cahiers Noirs*. The fact that Williams's signature plays—*Streetcar* and *Cat*—were enjoying revivals at the time did not bode well for his attempts to convince his public that his dramaturgy had changed. Time and the success of recent revivals of Williams's post-*Iguana* plays have, to a certain extent, justified the venting evident in the essays "The Blessings and Mixed Blessings of Workshop Productions" and "Where My Head Is Now and Other Questions," where he writes:

Frankly, I find it a bit rough in the States and feel that I must absent me from their felicity for a while. My instinct has always been opposed to long stays in places not peaceful.

At the moment I am more interested in writing than in publishing or having further productions, but that is probably only the consequence of having gone through a Broadway production of *Out Cry*, which I honestly didn't think I would survive and am still not quite certain that I did.

Very often a period of rest is one of recuperation, and there is surely some significance in the fact that most of my present luggage on this trip that I'm undertaking consists of manuscripts not yet completed, which I intend to complete.

Intentions are sometimes delusions, but they are as necessary as breath.

So en avant, meaning right on. (NSE 176, emphasis added)

His two most political essays of the 1970s, "We Are Dissenters Now" and "The Misunderstanding and Fears of an Artist's Revolt," demonstrate as well how his frustration, compounded by heavy alcohol and drug abuse during his "stoned age" in the 1960s, was so extreme that it affected his ability to write cogently. Many of the fragments and drafts Williams wrote during this decade show (though perhaps no more authentically) Williams teetering on the verge of collapse. In his unpublished essay fragments, such as "These Scattered Idioms [III]" (ca. 1977), we get a clearer sense of his painful rambling and (it would appear) drug- and/or alcohol and fatigue-enhanced *cri du coeur*:

About my recent book of *Memoirs*, there have been some complaints that they were not well-organized or nor in a very good literary style. Now I will let you in on one disgraceful secret about the *Memoirs* which they did not contain: confess let you in on.

I did all my writing on them while I was working on a play, and I only worked on the *Memoirs* when I was too exhausted to continue work on the play. No excuses: just an explanation . . . (Texas, [1])

We must ask ourselves, as we do with all of Williams's confessions, where Williams draws the line between truth and "truth." His anger during the last two decades of his life clouded not only his personal judgments of people but also his perception and assessment of his own work.

Williams was indeed a paradoxical writer in his non-fiction, but that fact no more slights his essays than the paradoxical natures of his many characters damage his plays. Like them, his essays need to be read from multiple, often conflicting angles. Near the end of the foreword to *Memoirs*, which he disingenuously called "these trivialities" (M 301), Williams writes:

Is this book, then, with its rather unusual structure, a professional matter? Has any of my writing been "a professional matter"? I have always written for deeper necessities than the term "professional" implies, and I think that this has sometimes been to the detriment of my career. But more of the time to its advantage. (M xi)

All of his essays, from the pre-opening pieces to the book reviews, attest to Williams's one consistent effort to find and express in them what he believed to be the truth—the truth about himself and, above all, about his work. Shackelford provides a more useful assessment of Williams's essays instead: "Several recurring themes are evident in his personal essays. These include endurance and struggle; the problem of the artist in American society; the struggle over class, materialism, and the American dream; and the devaluation of the individual" (Shackelford, 105). As such, he adds, "[. . .] the difficulty of examining Williams's nonfiction is that, like much contemporary literature, it resists neat categorization." (Shackelford 108) To read one essay in isolation, then, is to encounter Williams the rhetorician, a prose writer who keenly discerned and attempted to satisfy those needs of his audience, one unlike any of those to whom he wrote his drama, his short fiction, his poetry, his candid letters, or his personal notebooks. To

read the essays as an ensemble is to discover Williams the artist, the thinker, the revolutionary, the man who could never let go of the past because he understood the necessities of its ties to his present and his perhaps. Or, as Shackelford concludes,

Williams the playwright is an effective, entertaining, and often perceptive prose writer. As a personal essayist, he moves from the personal to the critical to the social in one fell swoop. As a theorist of drama and critic of his own work, he is particularly significant. He understands his place in the western dramatic and literary traditions, and he recognizes the value of and importance of literature and nonfiction prose to American society and culture. (Shackelford 113)

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SHAKELFORD, “The Transmutations of Experience: The Aesthetics and Themes of Tennessee Williams’s Nonfiction,” *The Southern Quarterly* 38.1 (Fall 1999)

Notes :

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared as the afterword to the collection of Williams’s essays, *New Selected Essays: Where I Live*, ed. John S. Bak (New York: New Directions, 2009). All references made to Williams’s published essays in this article are taken from this collection and will appear parenthetically in the text abbreviated *NSE*. References to his unpublished essays will also appear parenthetically in the text and include the university archives where the essay is located and the page number on which the citation can be found in brackets, as Williams rarely numbered his pages.

² Given that both works were penned concurrently, they share many passages. See the story of Marion Vaccaro Black peeing on herself in Rhodes (*M* 261-62; *Moise* 50-51); of the Irish truck-driver who knocked out the front teeth of the “middle-aged queen”

(*M* 280-81, *Moise* 79-80); of his trip to Bangkok and his staying in Somerset Maugham and Neil Coward's bedroom (*M* 299; *Moise* 128); of the March 1968 atrocities at My Lai and the cover-up which followed (*M* 313; *Moise* 139); of Rimbaud's *Bateau Ivre* (*M* 155; *Moise* 150-1); and also the story of *Who's Who* in 1952 (*M* 133-34; *Moise* 162-63). All citations in this essay from Williams's *Memoirs* (New York: New Directions, 1972, 2006) and *Moise and the World of Reason* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975) appear parenthetically in the text abbreviated *M* and *Moise*, respectively.

³ Having felt "the jig was up" yet again in his life, Williams retold this in the *Memoirs* (*M* 176, 227-30) and fictionalized it in *Moise* (*Moise* 100-2). Most of the story of his first stay in Key West in the winter of 1941, as recounted in his 1973 essay "Homage to Key West," appears in *Memoirs* (*M* 79-83).

⁴ He began one draft of his essay "Prelude to a Comedy" (ca. 1960), "Since I am never going to get around to writing my memoirs, it may be excusable for me to write these Sunday articles for the *New York Times* [. . .]" (Columbia [1]). See all the typescripts to this essay: "These Scattered Idioms [I]" (ca. 1960), Historic New Orleans Collection (MSS 562#625); "These Scattered Idioms [II]," "First Draft: Some Philosophical Shop Talk, or, An Inventory of a Remarkable Market," "Some Philosophical Shop-Talk," "Sam, You Made the Interview Too Long," and "Personal as Ever" (all ca. 1960), Columbia; and "Deepest Instinct, or Fate . . ." (ca. 1960), Texas (box 11, folder 10).

⁵ He writes later, "Of course, I could devote this whole book to a discussion of the art of drama, but wouldn't that be a bore? (*M* 181). Then later, as if almost apologetically, he adds: "Well, now, about plays, what about them? Plays are written and then, if they are lucky, they are performed, and if their luck still holds, which is not too frequently the case, their performance is so successful that both audience and critics at the first night are aware that they are being offered a dramatic work which is both honest and entertaining and also somehow capable of engaging their aesthetic appreciation. I have never liked to talk about the professional side of my life" (*M* 212).

⁶ Williams, who worked briefly for MGM studios in 1943, uses this term in the untitled holograph fragment of "Past, Present & Perhaps" (ca. 1957): "I've been asked once again to write a Sunday piece for the drama pages of the *New York Times*, as a kind of 'trailer' for a play coming into in [. . .]" (Texas [1]). See all the typescripts of this essay: "Past, Present & Perhaps" (ca. 1957), Texas (box 34, folder 3); "A-Do-It-Yourself Interview" (ca. January 1957), UCLA (box 1). Always commercially minded, Williams rarely, if ever, skipped the opportunity to appear in the pages of the *New York Times* to promote the premiere of one of his plays.

⁷ In a fragment of "Prelude to a Comedy" (ca. 1960), Williams writes, "You see I'm still doing it! Justifying, explaining, the facts of my life. I guess this is a dodge. I do it to avoid doing another kind of piece, an 'Apologia' for the work about to be exposed on the Broadway stage" (Texas, [1]).

⁶ As Shackelford notes in his article in *The Southern Quarterly* 38.1 (107):

Although there have been frequent references to Tennessee Williams's personal essays, prefaces to his own plays, and reviews of others' creative work, little if any critical attention has been given to what these nonfiction pieces contribute to our understanding of Williams the individual, the artist, the intellectual, and the critic. Williams the personal essayist, social critic, and literary theorist does, however, deserve serious scholarly attention. (104)

Written in 1999, Shackelford's essay remains the only study of Williams's non-fiction outside of the *Memoirs*, and yet, "there is much more to be said concerning this unexplored territory in Williams studies" (113). It is my hope that this essay will alter that fact.

⁹ The title was written in holograph after the essay was typed. The question mark in Williams's hand suggests his uncertainty in entitling this essay.

¹⁰ In another draft of this essay, he begins:

These invitations to write Sunday pieces about your new play can be anticipated in advance, but you're always too busy making the final changes in your script to think much about them before the dead-line for them is hard upon you, and then the state of your nerves, if you are not a calm writer, makes it all but impossible to compose such a piece without a note of hysteria. (Texas [1])

See all typescripts of this essay: "A Thing Called Personal Lyricism," "Some Qualifications," "Personal Lyricism (?)," and "Lyric Theatre: a Faith" (ca. 1955), Texas (box 34, folder 3).

¹¹ The title, added later, is in holograph, and the fragment was typed on Traymore Hotel letterhead.

¹² In *Moise*, we find a similar comment about the looseness of the novel's structure, here made by the narrator himself: "It's seldom my practice to observe sequence. When I try to, my thoughts blur and my fingers shake [. . .]. Now I have got to discontinue this *thing* for a while, even though I never ignore the possibility that some inadvertence, a sudden subway of sorts, may stop it permanently in its tracks [. . .]" (*Moise* 38-39, emphasis added). In the essay "Williams' Wells of Violence" (later reprinted as the foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth*), Williams resorts to "this course of free association" (NSE 93).

¹³ This was true to a certain extent. In the postscript to a letter to Audrey Wood, dated 22 June 1952, Williams writes:

I have not had time to write the "essay" they [Caedmon's] want for the recordings. Tell Miss Roney that perhaps she could use something from my introduction to the published version of "Battle of Angels." States my philosophy of art. I also told Leonard Lyons I would write a "guest column" for him. Do you think he would

use, instead, a humorous poem that I will send? Please enquire. I am doing a piece for the Sunday Times magazine. (435)

See *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*, eds. Albert J. Devlin and Nancy M. Tischler

¹⁴ To some extent, this philosophy of writing lacks rigor as far as his attention to minute details is concerned. In *Memoirs*, Williams does not bother to quote verbatim a stanza from Rimbaud that his youthful friend Clark Mills McBurney translated: "His translation of the final verse of the greatest lyric by Rimbaud went something, but not exactly, like this [. . .]" (M 123). At times in his essays, he does not even take the time to look up the name of characters or check the facts of his life or work, which could suggest a slovenly attitude toward his non-fiction in general. Speaking about how Nellie in *Summer and Smoke* is cut from *Eccentricities of a Nighthingale*, for instance, Williams writes in his essay "I Have Rewritten a Play for Artistic Purity" (1976), "nor did any of what's-her-name—it happily escapes me" (NSE 182). For Williams, artistic "truth" was never in the detail but rather in the picture that it served to capture on the canvas, and his prose pieces, like his plays, were canvases on which he attempted to capture that "truth."

¹⁵ See my "Complete List of Tennessee Williams's Non-fiction Prose Writings" at the back of NSE (293-302). Essays such as "The Catastrophe of Success," "Person-To-Person," "The Past, the Present and the Perhaps," "Prelude to a Comedy," or even Williams's introduction to Carson McCullers's *Reflections in the Golden Eye* have so many versions, and in such varying states of completion, that they unconditionally attest to the seriousness in which their writing was undertaken. Williams did not view his essays as literary distractions to fill the downtime from playwrighting, nor as writing exercises to jumpstart his muse in the small hours of the morning when strong, black coffee no longer did the trick. He fully understood and appreciated the artistic commitment to writing prose pieces, be they the essays for the *New York Times* or the reviews of and introductions to his friends' books.

¹⁶ Williams writes here,

I do not use exclamation marks as I think that they are probably the most dispensable piece of punctuation to which a writer can descend unless he is writing for dumb actors and actresses like that unfortunate playwright whom I encountered before the Truck and Warehouse Theater. [. . .] As for a distinguished failed prose writer, surely he can content himself with the comma and the period and the marks of quotation of speech between persons and also, in my peculiar case, with the neat spaces which indicate the division of section from following section as a slight variation indicates the progression of a fugue in the world of music. (*Moise* 132-33)

¹⁷ Qtd. in Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 249.